

Mount Saint Bernard
Ian Thomson

Thursday 18th January 1996: 7.12 pm

After years of reading Thomas Merton, I have finally arrived in a Cistercian monastery. My first impressions are that it is smaller, more welcoming and less forbidding than I had anticipated. The guest house is well heated and comfortable. David has a large double room, possibly too big for comfort, but he's not worried. There is more space to spread out his papers. He has a raft of material to prepare for talks on Lancelot Andrews, TS Eliot and others. I have a single room with basin, facing north ... I think. One problem with arriving in a fog is that one has no sense of direction. And Chamwood Forest must be at least two overcoats colder than the Somerset Levels ...

We are greeted by a very frail and exceedingly sweet Father Thomas, standing in for the Guestmaster, Father Mark. Shown to our rooms, we begin unpacking. Within minutes there is a knock on my door. It is Father Hilary - with that light, musical voice, it couldn't be anyone else. We talk about this and that ... Merton, coolly viewed by all at Mount Saint Bernard, except for Fr Hilary ... his visit to Gethsemani last year ... his work on John of Ford.

David joins us. We talk about the abbey, its age and its history. Founded in 1835, it is a post-Napoleonic foundation with English and Irish monks who - in the great tradition - built the place themselves, to the Gothic revival designs of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, no less. Disciplined by Cistercian austerity, it is one of the more restrained examples of his work, Fr Hilary takes us on the grand tour - simple, bare elegant cloisters with well proportioned arches, the beautiful church, its cruciform ground plan with the high altar as centre and focus of activity, and fine choir stalls designed by Eric Gill. The statues and reliefs of Christ and the Saints were carved by monks in the style of Gill. Solid, chunky crosses, uncompromising in their assertion of certainty.

Thursday evening - 8.15 pm

Back from Compline and I think I am just beginning to latch on to what it is all about. This place opens your eyes and wakes you up. Silence as we focus on the words of the Psalmist, and the Nunc Dimittis (I love the Book of Common Prayer version but the "Catlick" words are *fresh*). We turn about and look up at a plain and simple statue of Our Lady, crowned and holding the infant Jesus above the East Door, and sing the *Salve Regina*. As we finish, the great bell tolls the *Angelus* - three times three times three - and all the lights go out. Robed in white, insubstantial, the monks move through the dark informal procession.

Silence once again. Walking out of the east door into the cold night air, it is fog-misty and still. I am with someone else. We don't say a word but drift apart and walk our separate ways through the narrow gate and along the path beside the abbey church, back to the guest house. There is the sharp relief of clean cut stone walls and corners. Sculptured arch. Misty pools of light. Calvary looms up to the right, dark, mysterious and disquieting. To our left, the stolid ordinariness of the guest house block with lighted windows beckoning. The great double doors lead into the warmth and light. Whispered goodnights (it's only 8 pm!). It is time for the Great Silence which lasts until after Mass tomorrow morning.

A voice breaks in the stillness. It is an itinerant Polish businessman pleading for a bed for the night. "The fog is so dense, so cold, so penetrating ... the roads are quite impassable". I do not hear Father Mark's reply. I go up to my room and shut the door.

Reflections: Office robes in white pegged in rows to a wall. A confusion of corridors, immaculate with polished floors. The splendid galleried octagonal library, at one time the chapter house, with a great tent suspended from its roof to keep in the warmth. Pure Pugin. Fr Hilary once nearly came to grief attempting to clean the roof beams from a gantry. He looked down and went rigid with terror. Sticking it out, it took him three days to finish the job. There are two sets of Thomas Merton shelves up in the gallery but not all that many of his books to fill them. Monks in overalls and baseball caps sort out the electrics in the abbey church. We are introduced to Father Robert, 92 and spry as a young bird. He doesn't want to hang around too long but believes in keeping fit.

The other guests, this Thursday night: a tough but humorous nun living on her own in Coventry. She owns nothing but appears to have everything. A bright, articulate and fit looking Franciscan priest from Nottingham. Laconic Gerard from Huddersfield. The others are not yet formally introduced: a woman sales executive from Birmingham, an anxious smoker from London.

A good night's sleep is shattered by the great bell for Vigils at 3.25 am. Although I plan to attend most of the office services, I cop out of this one, snuggle down in bed, and wait for the final three by three by three. It comes and I fall asleep once more.

Friday 19th January 1996: 9.30 pm

Mass before breakfast. The lovely yet simple ritual involves everybody and is focussed on the beautiful altar table in the centre of the church under the great tower. Surrounded by priests in white with green vestments, brothers in simple white, laypeople casual in blues, browns, pinks and greens. The chalice is earthenware. Beautiful, functional, real. The communion wafers are made from a kind of wholemeal flour. Presented in a simple earthenware dish, they melt in the mouth.

Mass over, the anxious smoker returns to London, two women arrive for the day from Market Harborough. One is a nun, PBVM, prison visitor and social worker. She is assertive but not unpleasantly so and has a lovely sense of humour.

I walk up Calvary before coffee. Boulders and crags, it is a Transvaal kopje, grim and grey in the fog. Naturally, I ascend the hill on the downward path. So the first thing I see is the tomb. A cave like building with a life sized painted wooden Pieta within. The Virgin holding the body of Christ. Surprising myself, I find it curiously moving. The mourning mother. An archetype. I think of Christine and Neil, of Jane and Wally. I think of the mothers of Sarajevo, Belfast and Jerusalem. And now, two months later, the mothers of Dunblane. After the tomb the crucifixion itself loses some of its impact. Carved stone figures very much in the Gill style. Detached and monumental, they leave me cold. The long gentle slope down the up-side of the hill. I've clearly tackled it all the wrong way round. But that's an old habit.

Talks with Fr Hilary are snatched between meals, the daily office and his duties as bursar. Getting away from theology and the organisation of things and ideas, I need to focus on experience. He lends me a book by Fr Henri le Saux - the French priest who after experiencing *darshan* with the dying Hindu mystic Ramana Maharshi, called himself Abishiktananda and moved to the site of Maharshi's ashram at Arunachala in South India and became a Hindu hermit and Saddhu. Yet he retained his faith and his priesthood. Something which baffled his Hindu friends who believed he'd long grown out of such things.

After None, David and I visit the shop, where we are greeted by a Yorkshire brother. A characteristic of many Cistercians is their sheer ordinariness, their normality, their simplicity. Another is their transparent warmth. A cross country walk with David. Pugin's wild Sicilian landscape has been pretty thoroughly tamed by now. Years and years of backbreaking work have domesticated the wilderness. Just as at Citeaux and Gethsemani. But the monks no longer work in the fields, which have been put into the hands of a manager. In the distance we see a cowed and bearded figure striding through ploughland. It is Fr Theodore on his way back to the Duck house, his hermitage for 29 years.

We return to the guest house for tea with Fr Hilary and Fr Mark. As much as we would like to hold a Merton conference or retreat at Mount St Bernard, it is obviously quite impractical. The place is far too small and the accommodation limited. Neither are there monks available to conduct retreats. They are all much too busy. But for anybody wanting to spend a few days in silence or on a small group retreat, the abbey is perfect. The best time is in the spring or autumn when the place is at its quietest and most peaceful.

Vespers is followed by supper. More people have arrived in the guest house for the weekend. It is a mixed group, including the chairman of governors of a

major public school, several ladies of varying ages and a couple of gung-ho fundamentalists. I make the serious mistake of arguing some point or other. The response is ferocious in its intensity, their conviction blinding. I return to solitude and bed, remembering Melvyn Matthews' analogy of monastery and parish as a kind of cooking pot. An abbey guest house is clearly no exception.

It has all been very tiring. I am knocked out by 9.35 pm and only hope the bells don't wake me up at three. How many people on retreat actually get up and attend Vigils? I think I'm drifting off ...

Tomorrow ... the journey home.

Anyone wishing to spend a few days on retreat at Mount St Bernard should write to The Guestmaster, Mount Saint Bernard Abbey, Coalville, Leicester, LE6 3UL. Telephone: (01530) 832298 / 832022 or Fax (01530) 814608. Guests are not charged for their stay but the community is obviously grateful for any offerings made to help defray costs.



Sufism: the 'Strange Subject'

Thomas Merton's Views on Sufism
by Terry Graham

The Trappist monk, adherent to one of the most austere of the celibate orders of Roman Catholicism, is addressing a group of his younger brethren gathered round him, like a genial football coach or a hearty scoutmaster rallying his eager charges. He tosses off a rhetorical question to catch his audience provocatively off guard, telling them that he'd been asked to talk about mystical theology. "Who wants mystical theology in a monastery?!"¹ says he mischievously. "That's almost as bad as bootlegging or something!" dismissing it, bug-eyed with mock wondering disgust. "The last thing in the world any modern, progressive Catholic wants to hear about is mystics ... I sort of throw it at you with a Moslem disguise or something like that in which it is more acceptable."

At this point, having warmed his audience up, he launches into the topic of the day.

"Now, we'll talk about Sufism. Sufism is a very strange subject, and it should be kept a strange subject." He has his listeners intrigued. "Don't ever let anybody ever get up here, or anywhere else, and give you a course on Sufism," introducing the class with bonhomie to cover his genuine modesty about presenting a subject for which in fact he was, despite his humble disclaimers, perfectly well qualified. "Because anybody who is giving you a course on Sufism is giving you a false bill of goods, and anyway, what do you suppose Sufism is all about?" More palaver, more dismissive references. Now, he has his monastic audience panting to know more. He had bridged the gap, talking not only about the 'taboo' subject of mysticism, but presenting it from the point of view of another religion: Islam.

This folksy, down-to-earth style of speech characterises the series of informal Sunday classes which the teacher has organised to stimulate the monks' faith and practice. In this case the topic is Sufism, to which six talks are devoted, at this point, as part of a series carrying on throughout the years 1967-68. The venue is the Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in the blue-grass meadows of Kentucky. The speaker is Father Louis, better known to the world by his given name: Thomas Merton, a name to conjure with amongst the spiritually inclined-intelligentsia of the Western world.

Merton was a man who had given up a promising career in journalism that could have led into politics. A man whose charm and breadth of knowledge could unlock the doors of any social milieu. Yet a man who had chosen to convert